THE REAL THING
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Psalm 19:1–10
Romans 12:9–21

"Let love be genuine;
hate what is evil,
hold fast to what is good."
Romans 12:9 (NRSV)

The people who heard Jesus' disciples proclaiming the Good News
were as impressed by what they saw as by what they heard.
They saw lives that had been transformed—
men and women who were ordinary in every way
except for the fact that they seemed to have found the secret of living.
They evinced a tranquility, simplicity, and cheerfulness
that their hearts had nowhere else encountered.
Here were people who seemed to be making
a success of the enterprise everyone would like to succeed at—
life itself.

Huston Smith
The Soul of Christianity:
Restoring the Great Tradition

Startle us, again, O God, with your truth.
And open our hearts and minds again to your amazing love
for the world and for each of us; in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

"Hell," the great Russian novelist Dostoevsky said, is "the suffering of being no longer able to love." I'd like to be able to say that I found that in my most recent reading of *The Brothers Karamazov*, but the truth is it is in another book, one I read recently by Chris Hedges, *Losing Moses on the Freeway*. Hedges remembers that definition of hell in a gripping account of life in Roxbury, a blighted ghetto in Boston: "Hell—no longer able to love."

Chris Hedges is a distinguished foreign correspondent who has worked for the *New York Times,* the *Christian Science Monitor,* and National Public Radio. He has covered and written about the most critical issues of our time, and he was part of the *New York Times* team that won a Pulitzer for

reporting on global terrorism. He is also the son of a Presbyterian minister and a graduate of Harvard Divinity School. His book *Losing Moses on the Freeway* is about the Ten Commandments and American life.

In the compelling first chapter he tells about being assigned as a student pastor to a small inner-city Presbyterian church in Roxbury.

Roxbury was a jolt to his system and his beliefs and ultimately his vocational decision.

On Hedges' first trip to his new parish, the subway driver asks him, "Why do you want to get off here?" The neighborhood has the highest number of homicides in the city, the streets and sidewalks littered with broken glass. On his first day, he finds a broom and trash barrel and starts to sweep up the glass. Two teenagers watch from across the street with bemused curiosity. As he scoops the glass onto a shovel, he hears the sound of another bottle being shattered. The two boys are grinning. "Come sweep this up," one says, and they laugh.

Patrick and Tyrone are his challenge and his nemeses. Patrick and Tyrone cannot read, write, or tell time. They do not attend school. They live together in an abandoned house; they have no families. They spend their time stealing car batteries and selling them to local body shops for $5.

After an altercation with the boys in which Hedges, a boxer, shoves one of them to the ground, the police arrive and an officer tells him, "Listen, you are not going to get anywhere by being nice. When you are nice it is weakness."

Hedges graduated from Harvard Divinity School and decided to be a reporter, not because he had given up but because he wanted to be involved even more deeply in the suffering of humanity, primarily suffering as a result of war. At the end of this remarkable book, he's home from Bosnia, in his house in rural Maine, writing. He walks by the room where his children are sleeping, feels a catch in his throat. He loves them so much it hurts, and he remembers those two other youngsters Patrick and Tyrone, years before.

He reflects:

> Love means living for others. Many parents know this sacrifice—to create life at the expense of our pleasure, career, dreams. We must be willing to lose life in order to create and preserve life. . . . Those who have this love are able to receive and give love to others. Those who do not know the love live in Dostoevsky's hell. The worst torment

> in life, the torment known to Patrick and Tyrone, is the torment of being exiled to a life without love. (p. 173)

"Let love be genuine," a man wrote 2,000 years ago. Paul was his name, a follower of Jesus. He was a lawyer, a Pharisee, a devout Jew who earned a living at the law and as a tent maker. In a dramatic experience, in the midst of persecuting followers of Jesus, Paul was transformed. Now he was an eloquent, passionate, brilliant follower and advocate of Jesus, whom he knew to be Christ, the chosen redeemer and savior. Paul knew the power of transformation, and he knew that power came not from coercion, not from trying as hard as he could to please God, but from love, God's love shown in Jesus Christ.

When he wrote letters to the early Christian churches—letters that make up a major portion of the New Testament—he returned again and again to that theme of transformation. Something new has happened in human history and for individual Christians. Everything is different now. Life is now reshaped and remolded and refashioned after the pattern of Jesus. Followers of Jesus are a "new creation," he once wrote. His followers will look different and behave differently. And the difference will be love.

When the world looked at the first Christians, it did see something new and conspicuous. "See how they love one another" is one of the first recorded observations. The world saw a new community that looked and acted like no community anyone had ever seen before. They called it "ecclesia"—church, Christian church, patterned after the life of Jesus, the Christ.

Back in the sixties, someone asked, "If being a Christian were a crime, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" Does the way you live, what you do, how you use your resources, what you care most passionately about—would it show something of your faith?

That question has always made me a little uncomfortable frankly, because I've known people who seemed to enjoy a little too much being conspicuous about their religion. My father was particularly suspicious of people who "wore their religion on their sleeve," the way he put it. Nevertheless, there is in Paul's thought a behavioral imperative to religion. If you want to talk the talk, you have to walk the walk. Professions of faith are like the sounds of "noisy gongs or clanging cymbals" apart from love, he wrote.

Bill McKibben, in an essay in this August's *Harper's* that caught everyone's attention with its title, "The Christian Paradox: How a Faithful Nation Gets Jesus Wrong," observes that the two most popular forms of Christianity in America today don't have much to do with love at all—in fact, don't have much to do with Jesus and what he taught and lived. The "end of the world, Jesus is coming" apocalypticism of the *Left Behind* series of books teaches

that at the end, which is imminent, there will be a lot of bloodshed, violence, gore; only a few will be raptured; the rest utterly destroyed. And there is a relentless focus on the self at many of the most popular megachurches, where faithfulness translates into success, where everything is designed to cultivate a better life, where Christianity means a way to self-improvement, "how to raise your children, how to get along, how to have a better marriage, how to be a success."

Paul said it's about love, love for others.

The Christian life for Paul is a response to the love of God in Jesus Christ. Christians are generous, compassionate, merciful, just, and loving as a lived response to this amazing grace of God in Christ.

It is a worldly, earthy, social, political love for Paul. The Christian life will be lived thoroughly and intentionally in the world.

"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good." You have to do that in the world

Part of what we are to be about is not to retreat to a spiritual cloister where it is not difficult to be kind and forgiving and loving but, as a church and as individual believers and followers of Jesus, to live intentionally, in the world where things get complicated and it is not always clear how to be faithful and loving. "Hold fast to what is good."

Sometimes that worldly goodness, which I think must be particularly pleasing to God, turns up in the midst of crises and suffering. Who will ever forget the goodness that began to emerge in unexpected places after 9/11, the genuine kindness and compassion and self-sacrifice shown by ordinary people, and the goodness expressed again by thousands of acts of bravery and selflessness after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita? I received a letter from Kristin Sadie, a Pastoral Associate over at Holy Name Cathedral, last week, thanking us for joining Holy Name in helping with hurricane relief. Together, the congregations filled a forty-five-foot semitruck with diapers, canned goods, peanut butter, and granola bars. A beautiful sight, Kristin said, almost four-and-a-half tons.

Kristin described two young men in an SUV who had held a block party the night before to collect donations, and a young couple who came with a loaded pickup truck. They told her they had lost their children at an early age and every year on the anniversary of their death did something to help others, and a homeless man, watching all this happening in the parking lot across from Holy Name, walked across the street, and pulled a crumpled dollar bill from his pocket—all he had—and gave it. Hold to the good.

Paul simply assumes that once the love of God starts to go to work in your life, once you open the door to your heart and invite love in, you are going to change and become a new person.

Love, genuine love, changes things. The early Christians became new people because they became convinced that God loved them and forgave them and accepted them and embraced them and saved them.

God knows, literally, how desperately the world needs that love, and so do we, each one of us. There is in the heart of each one of us a hunger for authentic love: a hunger to know it and receive it and experience it, and an equally deep and urgent hunger to give it.

Rollo May wrote in *Love and Will,* "Life comes from physical survival: but the good life comes from what we care about" (p. 289).

I've always been interested in and intrigued by the late Arthur Miller, who some believe was the greatest playwright of our time. I heard him speak to a group of clergy once at Riverside Church in New York City. He was not a traditional church person, but he told us how important ministry was and how big biblical themes informed much of his writing.

In his autobiography, *Timebends*, Miller tells about his marriage to Marilyn Monroe, her depression and despair, her isolation and paranoia and growing dependence on barbiturates. Miller feared for her life. He remembers one evening, after her doctor medicated her and she was finally peacefully sleeping, he found himself thinking, "What if she were to wake and I were able to say: 'God loves you, darling,' and she were able to believe it! How I wish I still had my religion and she still had hers. It was suddenly quite simple—we had invented God to keep from dying of reality, yet love was the realist reality of all" (cited by Donald McCullough in *If Grace Is So Amazing, Why Don't We Like It?*' p. 38).

"If only she could hear and believe, 'God loves you, darling.'"

Let love be genuine. "The worst torment in life," Chris Hedges concludes, "the torment known to Patrick and Tyrone, is being exiled to a life without love." Neither of the boys had ever been loved by anyone and were simply incapable of caring about anything, anyone, even themselves. "Love," Hedges concludes, "is the mysterious life force that comes closest to putting us in touch with the power and majesty of God."

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper has many meanings. We participate in it and experience it differently.

Today, World Communion Sunday, as we come to the Lord's Table with millions and millions of Christians throughout the world, in a world deeply divided by political and ethnic and religious ideology, may the Sacrament be for us a sign of God's love for the whole world and for all its people. And may part of it be the gift of God's love given to us in Jesus Christ: love given once and for all, and over and over again, in his life poured out, body and blood, bread and wine.

And may part of it today be our resolve to allow that love into our lives, to allow it to transform us, and to begin to live lives of authentic faith, genuine love.

> Hold fast to what is good;
> love one another with mutual affection;
> be ardent in spirit,
> patient in suffering;
> persevere in prayer;
> contribute to the needs of the saints;
> extend hospitality;
> let love be genuine.
> Amen.